

UDC: 37.062 JEL: K4; I20

SCIENTIFIC REVIEW PAPER

Ethical Values in Education and Society



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ABSTRACT

Today, many educators, administrators, and parents are concerned over the startling rise in teen violence. Theories are expounded and old concepts are discarded. Still, within most school systems, violence, disrespect, and moral decay are quickly becoming the norm. This article provides some insight into how these concerns may be addressed within the school environment by teachers, parents, and administrators.

KEW WORDS: moral, ethics, ethical values, moral duty, ethical teaching, faith, moral education, values, critical thinking

Introduction

One of society's most important duties should be the teaching of ethical values, i.e. "the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation" (Ethics Research Center, n.p.) The noted scientist and humanitarian Albert Schweitzer stated, "Ethics is the activity of man directed to secure the inner perfection of his own personality" (Schweitzer and Campion 1987, 57). Dr. Schweitzer (1979, 119) further states:

The presupposition of morality is to share everything that goes on around us, not only in human life but in the life of all creatures. This awareness forces us to do all within our power for the preservation and advancement of life. The great enemy of morality has always been indifference.

Whether studying mathematics, English or physics, ethical teachings can, in one way or another, be incorporated into the lesson plan.

Today's muddle of lesson plans, meetings, new curricula, specialization and restrictions leaves teachers and administrators little time for teaching honesty, ethics, values or integrity. In fact, many educators believe that these topics are better covered by religious teachings. However, unlike religion which is based on faith and beliefs, ethics is more a "system of principles of conduct for man as a social being ..." and deals with the realm of actualities. (Mathews 1896, 376).

Other educators believe that values must be instilled by parents. However, during the most developmental period of a child's life, the role of the teacher is paramount. Although students are told not to cheat on exams, most other value comments are ignored. Even comments regarding cheating are shrouded in fear, embarrassment and getting caught, and not on character development and lofty principles.

Many high school students graduate, having disrespect for order, authority, justice or values. These students learn many of these characteristics through peer pressure and ethical laziness on the part of instructors. These scientists, future leaders, parents and politicians are, in many ways, devoid of ethical consciousness. Replacing time-honored values are indecency, snobbishness, and disrespect for values. (Cobbett, 1829: Gopalan, K. 1990 195-97). According to the National Education Association of the United States,

It is undeniable that at present there is sweeping over the country, over the entire world in fact, a wave of disrespect for authority. If it affected only the older people, that is, those whose age would presuppose some lingering fragments of gray matter—somewhat atrophied it is true—the condition would not be so serious. Time and a series of first-class funerals, more or less continued, would gradually effect a cure. But the young, by heredity and environment, by precept and example, are being rapidly imbued with the same spirit. Our boys and girls have become infected with the identical virus, and one of the most important problems that confront a genuine educator today is how to combat this widespread disaffection. (National Education Association, 1919, 661).

The above statement was written in 1919, alas nearly 100 years later, the situation has gotten worse. William Bennett indicates the major downhill disciplinary problems of students between 1940-1990.

<u>Top Disciplinary Problems</u> according to a Public School Teachers Table from William J. Bennett, <i>The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators, Facts and Figures on the State of American Society</i> (New York: Touchstone. 1994), 83. Source material is from the <i>Congressional Quarterly</i> .	
1940	1990
Talking out of turn	Drug abuse
Chewing gum	Alcohol abuse
Making noise	Pregnancy
Running in the halls	Suicide
Cutting in line	Rape
Dress-code violations	Robbery
Littering	Assault

In 1996, Robert Heron Bork write that regarding his opinion of America's swing toward liberalization and the terrible effect it was having on values and morality. Bork maintains that

what has gone wrong appears to flow from a poisonous combination of radical egalitarianism and radical individualism. Egalitarianism means that faculties have lost self-confidence to tell students what it is they ought to learn."

Radical individualism causes students to resist dictation by college authorities and faculty to prefer following their own interests to learning what the institution wants taught. These two forces press higher education in the same direction. (Bork 1996, 256).

Many of these attitudes and values, or lack thereof, derived from the lack of quality general education programs. These programs comprised 55 percent of requirements in 1914 to be reduced by the 1930s to only 33 percent (Bork, 1996, 257). Bork believed that there must always remain a rigor and moral compass in higher education. Bork showed in the final chapter of his book, that there has been for nearly 100 years a constant decline of educational stringency and logic revealed through fewer assignments, the lack of quality work, poorer curriculum, and less work in completing educational goals (Bork 1996, 257).

The National Association of Scholars found that

the degree of rigor in a curriculum is important to more than how much the student learns. "It also has implications for character formation. The ability to work hard, to persevere in exacting tasks, and to master detail is all critical in determining individual achievement." (Bork, 1996, 257).

By 2008 the *Digest of Educational Statistics* shows an ever increasing trend in criminal disciplinary problems (National Center for Educational Statistics 2007-08, 3). John Locke stated that a child's mind is a blank slate or *tabula rasa* (P.C.1897, 471). Emphasis on learning should be placed on four major cornerstones: wisdom, virtue, breeding and learning (An Anglo-Saxon Mother 1917, 7). It is the responsibility of the instructor to make connections between the pre-consciousness and conscious mind. (An Anglo-Saxon Mother 1917, 17). Immanuel Kant believed that man was neither morally bad nor good (An Anglo-Saxon Mother 1917, 47).

Moral Education in Our Schools

In the 1800s, moral education within the school system was merely an extension of religious teachings. These teachings based on Puritan and Victorian ethics were beneficial in that they directed the student toward lofty goals and a more spiritual viewpoint. However, the discipline in teaching these goals was often based on misguided obedience to the teacher and total authority. All power was taken from the student and in many cases the child's will, individuality and spirit were crushed. "Spare the rod and spill [sic] the child" (Butler, 1662.) was the general adage of the period. In vogue, was the theory as put forth by noted educator Herbert Spence:

the first steps in self-control are taken at the behest of immediate consequences, be these either pleasant or painful. Until mind can look into the future and govern adjustment with reference to remote ends, the primitive pleasure-pain economy will and must be the only guide. Civilization imposes requirements the true value of which cannot be comprehended in the narrow span of the primitive mind. To wait until natural consequences shall correct misdemeanors is impossible under these conditions (Bagley 1907, 111).

William Bagley offered the viewpoint that teachers must implement many qualities in order to bring about order. They included: authority, effective discipline, tact, persistence, scholarship, justice, good nature, mechanized routine, individual treatment, ability to keep students occupied and substitution rather than repression (Bagley 1907, 92-104).

Even with this viewpoint, children still disobeyed and the outcry of many teachers and administrators was for a change. Although teachers see the importance of discipline as it relates to ethics, many also realized that students must be provided with ways to create an inner barometer, using

reason, which would strive to direct children toward ethical living (Tiatoria 2010, u.p.). As long as students are taught to strive for personal gain and interests, this selfishness mentality cannot obtain an altruistic spirit. (Mathews 1896, 374).

By the early 1900s, moral philosophy had begun to gradually change and the pendulum of social and philosophical change was swinging toward a more liberal interpretation of what constituted ethics and morality.

According to James L. Hughes (1911, 149):

Rational men and women speak no longer audaciously of breaking a child's will. They aim to aid in giving the child wisdom commensurate with his increasing power, and to keep him occupied, as far as possible, in the execution of his own plans, so that his will may grow strong and controlling by directing his own powers in the achievement of his own purposes. A self-active will is the supreme element that gives real value to character. Such a will cannot be developed by subordination; it does develop by co-operation and partnership... .

According to this philosophy, the right of a child, and the fullest opportunity to have a life of his own, is a right which should be sacredly respected by his parents. Hughes (1911, 149) believes that it is essential to a child's true growth in character.

In the 1920s and early 1930's many of the writings of the period, reflected the philosophy of getting ahead, securing better training, pleasure seeking and humanism (Brown, (ed.), 1936, 118; Gilbert, 1933, 178). This mentality continued until the Depression Era (McElaine, 1993) when moral teachings once again were emphasized by teachers as a way of facing the difficult social and economic issues of the time.

In an issue of *Educational Review*, Dr. K. Gopalan (1990, 195-97) of Madras Christian College (India) suggested that educators establish a moral and ethical values course for university students. Most behavior is, however, well established before college entry. Instilling moral responsibility should therefore be assimilated into curricula throughout the lower grades.

The Graduate School at Penn State has developed priorities toward developing commitment to ethics guidelines in their practices. These include: (Penn State, n.p.)

- Promise-keeping by the faculty;
- Honesty;
- Respect for students and faculty;

- Fairness in grading;
- Content competence;
- Pedagogical competency through objectives, and methods;
- Dealing with sensitive topics in a positive and honest manner;
- Student intellectual development;
- Not showing favoritism;
- Valid assessment of students;
- Keeping student grades confidential;
- Faculty being cooperative and respectful to each other and their disciplines; and
- Respect for institution's goals and policies.

Lindgren notes:

As an educator, an individual [must be] aware of the social spheres which influence his decisions concerning school policy and those actions which directly influence his students. ... A teacher is responsible for correcting those whom he regards as misinformed. At the same time, ... [he] should do so with love and kindness. ... the teacher should guide the student from ignorance to enlightenment through the use of empirical and rational knowledge. (C. E. Lindgren 1977, 1-3.)

Rather than creating a specific course (a greater burden on the teacher), moral values and concepts should be inter-woven into the coursework and after school activities. Teachers, through their actions inside and outside the classroom should strive to live a moral life. This is not done by merely attending church on Sundays and believing in an all powerful being but by performing daily, those actions which denote love, virtue, nobility, honesty and understanding. With widely differing political, social and cultural views, such a task is not easy. The benefits, however, would be enormous (Miller 1843).

Amoral and Immoral Activities

There are primarily three theories explaining immoral activities. First, man is inherently evil. Without guidance he will choose evil. Second, man is basically good. He, will in time, with guidance and direction, evolve into a "perfect" god-like creature. Third, some philosophers believe man, as a natural being, will do wrong if given the opportunity. According to this philosophy, man has good intentions but should be trained to choose good over evil (Lindgren 1977, 2).

Accordingly,

A child as a 'natural being' has the tendency to do wrong, if given the chance and will continue to do so unless corrected for his failures. This is not to say, however, that man is mean, selfish, sinful and indifferent to the truth, but rather that he is, due to his nature, more willing to take the easy path of existence. It is only during severe crises that the best of man's nature reveals itself in all its glory and brilliance. The corruption of man's nature does not compel him to follow evil, because God has supernaturally restored a measure of free will within every man. Man as a being of God has the liberty to choose good or evil. An individual is, therefore, responsible for his actions, not only to his fellowmen, but also to his Creator (Lindgren, 1977, 2).

Regardless of which theory one accepts, peer pressure, surroundings and home environment play roles in influencing behavior (Todd 1846). Since children are involved in school activities for most of the day, every attempt should be made to impart ethics and moral values. Value teaching should not be aimed at creating perfect individuals but rather ones that perceive right and wrong and can choose those values society and environment deem correct and proper. True education attacks wickedness and bigotry and instills justice, mercy and truth. Teachers must emphasize the importance of showing mercy. Additionally, it is the role of the educator to assist pupils in developing critical thinking and motivate learning, even at an early age (Lindgren 1977, 2; Lindgren 1992). To achieve such a goal, learning must be interesting and a teacher must possess a clear apprehension, sound judgment, good understanding and a capacity for reasoning (Harris 2011).

Knowledge of higher goals or purposes is also inherent in most people. It is these principles which we should aspire to develop in the 21st century. With Blackberries®, the Internet, iPods® and iPads® we often lose sight of our humanity. It is of upmost importance that moral education be structured so pupils can receive intellectual training in the social skills of perception communication and identifying. Any society achieving brilliance without conscience is dangerous (Gopalan 1990). As we, of a civilized society, continue to grow intellectually and technologically, we have somehow lost many of our hopes, dreams, goals, ethics and morals.

Values in the 21st Century

Unless good values and morals are taught, and pupils trained in understanding ethical concepts, brilliant and inquisitive minds will be swayed toward the 'darker side' of society. An individual who possesses many degrees and awards but has learned neither ethics nor integrity is still like a small child and deserves no respect (Miller 1843). He can easily be persuaded in either direction and his intellect and genius used to the detriment of mankind (Fanthorpe 1991, 23-26). As in Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany and other countries, individuals lacking a strong foundation of moral values were easily influenced by leaders possessing intellect, cunning and amoral behavior.

Moral Values

As children are spending less time with their parents than in previous generations, emphasis should be upon the impact of schools and their obligations of providing moral education (regarding responsibility of the school, read *Moral Values in Public Education*) (Ellis Ford Hardwick, 1958). Educational philosopher John Dewey stated that the educational system (teachers, professors and administrators) should try to become more closely related to true life experiences. Educator Max Lerner echoed this view stating that, "the aim of education should be to teach and learn how to aim an education, for the whole person, in the total life span." (Lindgren, 1992, 5). Dewey, however, believed an absolute good did not exist. "Every moral situation is unique having its own un-replaceable good." (Jensen and Knight 1981, 89).

Dewey (1909, 17) stated that, "interest in community welfare, an interest that is intellectual and practical, as well as emotional -- an interest, that is to say, in perceiving whatever makes for social order and progress, and in carrying these principles into execution -- is the moral habit..." Moral habit, therefore, comes from educating the student in understanding the benefits of possessing a chivalric spirit and in intensification society's customs and beliefs. If forced to conform due to fear the student "is basically unmoral and may, when provided the opportunity, become immoral when restrictions are removed." (Lindgren 1992, 5). Following a tradition with blind faith can be good or bad. Habitually following customs does not represent custody of true ethical values. Without coherent

thought-provoking understanding of each moral principle amoral behavior exists. As intellectual creatures, we should create a rule and then follow that law, because the law strengthens society. If, however, the rule becomes disadvantageous to society and we still continue in following this custom due to blind tradition, then individuals "no longer operate on a moral basis as we are no longer using the powers of perceiving rationalized conduct. (Lindgren 1992, 5) According to Strayer and Norsworthy (1920, 172), "morality requires that men have a reason for the faith that is in them."

The Kinetic Theory of Ethics

A belief does not become goodness until the student or educator possessing this faith implements it into his or her behavior pattern. An excellent example would be that of the *Bible* patriarch, Abraham who by faith was led to implement his faith through a deed. (Genesis 12). An individual may declare the highest beliefs but through his actions remain immoral. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), states that "Hell is full of good intentions..." (Killigrew 1894, 213). Intentions must be implemented. The statement, "Faith without works is dead", which appears in the King James *Bible* (1994, 1649) applies well to this situation. (Belok 1966).

Responsibility

Although teachers should provide ethical education, this does not always indicate making decisions or supplying laws of do and don't. Rather, ethical training denotes that the pupil is taught that integrity is behavior which is reliable and individualized and is foremost to the betterment of one's self and community. (Lindgren, 1992, 6; Hall and Davis 1975).

Often, society may deem a certain action immoral (English Gentlewoman 1845). This assertion may be based upon what is good for the betterment of society. It is the student's duty to rationally and morally pick the correct path. One must "establish fixed principles of benevolence, justice, truthfulness . . . and adhere steadfastly to them, despite the allurements of the world, the temptation of ambition or weariness of self conflict." (Lunettes 1868).

Conclusion

Motivating the student toward moral learning is therefore the educator's primary responsibility. Encouraging this type of consciousness, the educator should transmit the information which the pupil has learned to specific situations that have moral meaning (Lindgren 1992, 7). It is also the educator's duty to supply opportunities, allowing the pupil to implement new ethical concepts to realistic problems.

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Article history: Received: 8 March 2011

Accepted: 14 April 2011